DAWN

OPINION

Agriculture crisis

A NEW FAO report, *Impact of Disasters on Agriculture and Food Security*, is a grim reminder of the toll climate-driven disasters are exacting on global agriculture and food systems. The estimated cost of these disasters in terms of agricultural losses over the last 30 years is staggering: $3.26tr, or 4pc of global agricultural GDP. And behind the statistics lie millions of lost livelihoods, growing hunger and the increasing fragility of rural economies. The message is that climate disasters are intensifying faster than we can cope. The report also highlights a parallel digital revolution that could transform how we manage agricultural risks. AI, remote sensing, drones, sensors, and digital insurance platforms are opening new opportunities for proactive action rather than reactive responses. These technologies have enabled more precise early warning systems and allowed millions of farmers to access parametric insurance and timely advisories. However, we can also witness the widening gap between countries able to harness these technologies and those still struggling to gain even basic climate resilience. Nowhere is this divide more evident than in Asia, which accounts for nearly 47pc of all global agricultural losses, reflecting the region's acute exposure to floods, storms and droughts.

The report's findings are painfully familiar for Pakistan, which has become an epicentre of climate-induced agricultural devastation. Disastrous floods have exacted massive human and economic costs and reshaped our farming landscape. The soil has suffered deep erosion, with vast tracts facing rising salinity; irrigation and drainage networks remain damaged or dysfunctional. The effect is a decline in productivity in a sector that employs over a third of the labour force and is the backbone of national food security and the export industry.

The country's weak capacity to store, process and transport food has deteriorated further under the strain of repeated shocks. Food inflation, which disproportionately hurts the poor, has become a structural feature of the economy due to supply disruptions caused by the changing climate including extreme weather events. Disruptions to the farm economy extend far beyond immediate crop and livestock losses, and spill over into markets, financial systems, public health and social stability. Although digital technology is a game-changer, we lag behind other countries in digital crop monitoring, while farmers' access to advisory services is patchy at best, with negligible insurance penetration. Where digital tools do exist, they are not integrated into local decision-making. Pakistan urgently needs a national strategy to mainstream digital agriculture: crop mapping using remote sensing, AI-based pest surveillance, mobile advisory hubs and disaster-indexed insurance. The tools exist, but political will and investment are missing. The window for building tech-based resilience is closing faster than policymakers seem to realise.

Cost of no trade

AS border tensions escalate, Kabul's decision to terminate all trade with and through Pakistan in the next three months and reroute its imports and exports via Iran, Turkiye and Central Asia is likely to hit Afghanistan hard. But Pakistan will not be insulated from the fallout either. At stake are thousands of low-paid jobs and the survival of numerous small industrial units in KP relying on uninterrupted cross-border commerce with Afghanistan, as well as $1.1bn in export revenue, government tax collection and access to a long-established market next door. It is, therefore, no surprise that business leaders from the province have urged Islamabad to reconsider the weeks-long border closure, which has already inflicted significant losses on traders on both sides and left thousands of cargo trucks stranded at crossings. A media report indicates that Afghanistan is increasingly shifting its freight through Iran's port of Chabahar, bypassing Pakistan to avoid recurring border and transit disruptions. Kabul's trade with Iran has already reached $1.6bn — higher than its exchange with Pakistan — underscoring that its decision to halt trade is not merely an act of defiance but a potential strategic realignment.

Islamabad's concerns over the Afghan Taliban's refusal to rein in Pakistan-focused militants operating from its soil are genuine and must be addressed. However, a knee-jerk suspension of bilateral trade, without fully weighing its consequences, will not help break the deadlock, and may, in fact, weaken Islamabad's political leverage over Kabul and endanger its efforts to expand trade links with Central Asia. The recurring unrest at the Pak-Afghan border, and the temporary closures it often triggers, has long been a source of friction in bilateral trade. Yet neither side has previously allowed such disruptions to derail trade flows for so long. This time, however, both countries appear to be moving in a direction that will benefit neither. As a business leader from KP has rightly noted, nations may have political disputes to settle, but they do not stop trading with one another. The growing trade relations between India and China are one example: despite border clashes and deep political mistrust, neither side has ever cut off trade. As a recent report by a brokerage house notes, it is important for both Pakistan and Afghanistan to recognise that "a peaceful trade route is vital for both economies" for development and prosperity.

Journalists' safety

JOURNALISTS and media professionals may, perhaps, have been more enthusiastic about the announcement, but the past continues to weigh heavily on the community. The 12-member commission constituted by the government to oversee their protection is, without a doubt, a welcome step, but Pakistani journalists have also witnessed a long history of persecution, often exercised with impunity, that has left many unable to trust such initiatives. They will wait and see whether the newly constituted commission, comprised mainly of leaders and representatives of various journalists' bodies, can meaningfully change that trajectory. Formed to exercise the powers and functions laid down in the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act, 2021, the commission will act with the authority of a civil court trying a suit under the Code of Civil Procedure when investigating journalists' complaints against harassment, threats, torture, etc. It is hoped the government will strengthen its hand and give it the breadth it needs to exercise those powers.

It is only fair to point out at this juncture that many past cases, some concerning serious crimes like abduction, torture, harassment and even assassinations of journalists, have still not been closed. Despite efforts by rights activists and the media community, these cases were never investigated or prosecuted with the seriousness they deserved. Until the impression that journalists can be targeted with impunity is dispelled, no commission, no matter how high-powered, can be expected to act as an adequate safeguard against violence targeting journalists and media workers. While this commission has been granted the powers of a civil court, recognising those powers and complying with the commission's requests for assistance should not be left 'optional' for state institutions. It is vital for the health of any society that its media be able to speak truth to power without fear of violent or financially devastating reprisals. The government must commit fully to that principle to be taken seriously.

BY MALEEHA LODHI

Misplaced priorities

External overreach and internal underreach have long characterised the conduct of governments.

EXTERNAL overreach and internal underreach have long characterised the approach of governments in the country. Pakistan's history bears testimony to a phenomenon that has seen ruling elites focus more attention and energy on external engagements rather than on fixing perennial and mounting problems at home. Preoccupation with foreign pursuits has translated into less concentration on domestic challenges — as if the former can substitute for the latter.

Today too this stands out in sharp relief, as evidenced by the inordinate time spent by Pakistani leaders on foreign trips, regardless of pressing issues at home. For example, during the floods earlier this year that especially hit Punjab, the prime minister spent more time overseas than at home visiting the affected areas. More recently, he chose to preside over a cabinet meeting to approve the 27th Constitutional Amendment — no ordinary piece of legislation — by video link from Baku, where he was on a visit, which was hardly crucial.

Supporters of the government justify these more-than-frequent overseas visits as indicative of Pakistan's renewed prominence on the international stage, attributing this to the effectiveness of the government's foreign policy. But foreign policy gains are measured by outcomes, not activity. The real test is whether that delivers anything substantive to the country, and not the number of foreign visits undertaken by a leader or how he personally benefits from such tours. This is not to say Pakistan should not be diplomatically active. But diplomatic engagements should be purposeful and result-oriented, and not take priority over unaddressed governance issues at home.

External overreach and internal underreach has a long pedigree in the country's history. The origin of this repetitive pattern lies perhaps in the exigencies of the early chaotic years of Pakistan's existence. In the turbulent aftermath of partition and early conflict with India, Pakistan was faced with a hostile neighbour and its ever-threatening, aggressive posture. This urged Pakistani leaders at the time to pursue a strategy of 'external balancing' to counter India's power by seeking foreign alignments.

This, of course, made perfect sense. It also did not distract the leadership in the formative years from addressing urgent domestic challenges because creating the governance and military structures of a new state and dealing with the huge refugee influx could hardly have been postponed. Nevertheless, Pakistan's internal political evolution and foreign policy were greatly influenced by its quest for security. And it remained so for years to come.

However, two things happened over time. Prolonged and intense engagement in Cold War conflicts and involvement in later geopolitical developments aimed at strengthening the country's security ended up emaciating and exhausting Pakistan and compounding its domestic problems. For example, Pakistan's intimate decade-long involvement in the US-led war against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan — a war of unintended consequences — came at an extraordinary cost to the country's own stability. Its multidimensional fallout, whose ramifications are even felt today, needs no reiteration.

This also established a pattern of behaviour that was to resonate in subsequent years. While the country's rulers involved themselves in geopolitical games that sought to enhance Pakistan's international influence, at home the neglect of pressing economic problems as well as the education deficit exacted a heavy price. Again, the argument is not that Pakistan could have isolated itself from global and regional developments and avoided foreign engagements, but that its leaders failed to anticipate their consequences while paying little heed to festering internal problems.

Policies of external overreach also encouraged a habit of relying on outsiders to address economic challenges. Economic and military assistance or geopolitical rents received through various phases of the country's alignment with the US-led West created an official mindset of dependence. This set up perverse incentives for domestic reform. Aid and financial 'drips' from allies substituted for reforms that could have placed the economy on a sustainable high-growth trajectory and transformed the country.

It also yielded an approach that looked outside to deal with mounting problems and address sources of the country's internal weaknesses.

The foreign policy of successive governments intersected with their economic management approach by which the country pursued rent-seeking relationships with big powers, relying on aid and borrowing rather than finding a viable path to economic growth and development by counting on itself. But neither foreign assistance nor borrowed money had a transformative impact.

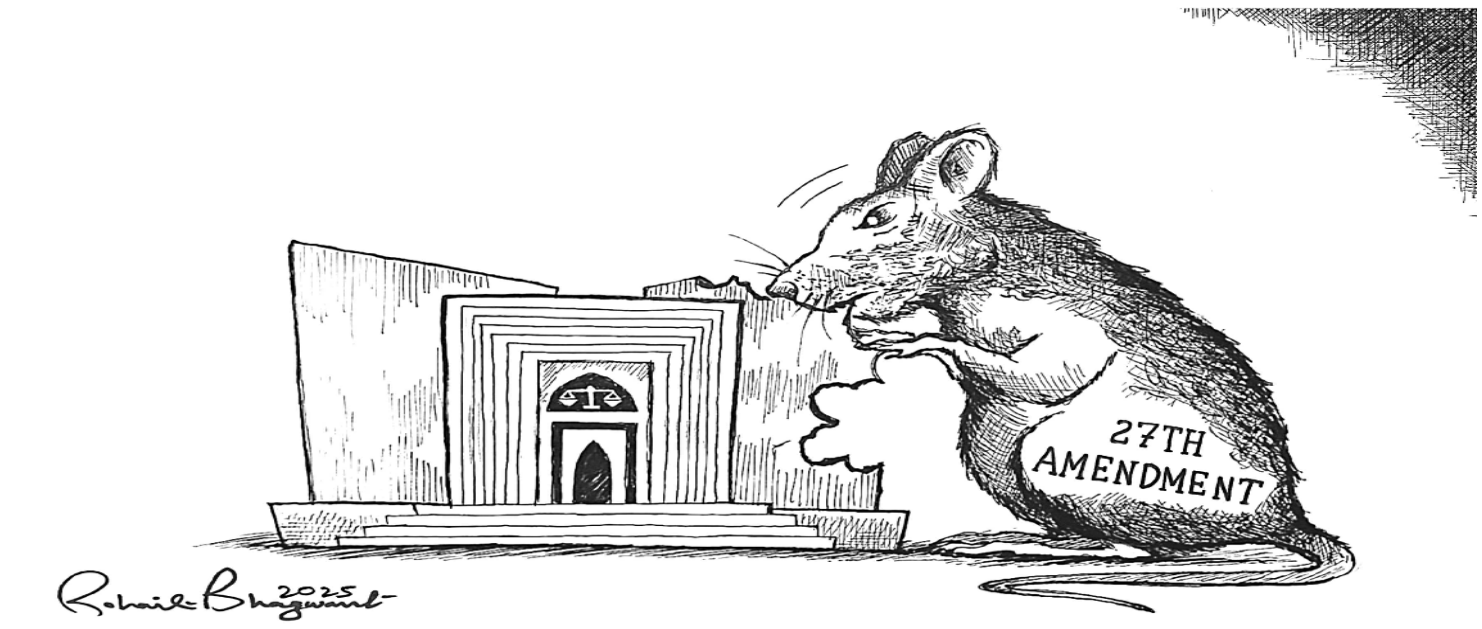
In recent years, reliance on the West has been replaced by dependence on China and Saudi Arabia as well as the Gulf states, who have repeatedly provided financial help to bail out the country from economic and liquidity crises. Roll-over of loans and deposits in the central bank to shore up foreign exchange reserves remains a familiar feature. The habit of depending on others has become so entrenched in the country's political culture that there is little questioning of this when members of the ruling elite routinely visit Gulf capitals to seek financial help. Instead, ministers hold this up as a foreign policy achievement. If this strategy was followed by an individual would that person be cheered for going out to get more loans when already in debt?

This strategy of reliance on external financial resources has helped civil and military elites to perpetuate their power, privileges, and lifestyle at the expense of the country's development. It has enabled them to avoid reform while keeping the economy afloat, frequently on life support either from the IMF or 'emergency' loans from 'friendly states.'

What has suffered grievously from neglect are various dimensions of human development and human welfare, which have deteriorated over time. The dismal state of literacy, education and healthcare as well as the rising level of poverty presents a grim picture today, and is the most serious consequence of internal underreach. What value do foreign engagements have when, as a result of official neglect, the condition of the majority of people doesn't improve and Pakistan makes little progress?

For all the present focus on the 'external', the factors that will shape Pakistan's destiny lie within and not outside the country. Its future will be determined by choices made at home rather than foreign pursuits. ■

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.



BY AISHA KHAN

Tenuous currents

IN a region where rivers carve the landscape and also trace the fault lines of politics, the Kabul River basin stands out as a microcosm of looming water insecurity. For Pakistan and Afghanistan, the river system presents an unusual hydrological and diplomatic twist, which in the absence of a comprehensive treaty, means increasing the risks of conflict, over a resource that is both a lifeline and geopolitical.

The Kabul River system has emerged as a potential flashpoint in Pak-Afghan relations, with growing concerns that Afghanistan's accelerated dam construction — supported by foreign actors, particularly India — could alter river flows critical for Pakistan's irrigation, hydropower, and food security.

Pakistan's complex position as both an upper and lower riparian on different tributaries of the basin presents both risks and opportunities. The Chitral River originates in Pakistan and flows into Afghanistan as the Kunar River, before re-entering Pakistan to join the Kabul River and eventually the Indus. This geographic configuration gives Pakistan upstream leverage, yet its downstream dependence makes it vulnerable to flow reductions.

Recent hydrological estimates indicate that Pakistan currently receives around 17 million acre feet annually from the Kabul River system, contributing nearly 20 per cent of total Indus inflows during the early Kharif season. Projected upstream development by Afghanistan including up to a dozen dams could reduce flows by approximately 3 MAF (about 16pc), directly impacting early cropping, water storage, and energy generation in KP and downstream Punjab. Climate change further compounds this risk by reducing glacial melt predictability and altering seasonal run-off patterns. The result: rising potential for hydropolitical tension andenvironmental insecurity in a basin already lacking a formal water-sharing framework.

The core political challenge constitutes Afghanistan's use of water infrastructure as a potential political or economic pressure tool to threaten Pakistan's water and food security. India's technical and financial involvement in Afghan hydropower and irrigation projects such as the Shahtoot Dam near Kabul and proposed Kunar-Panjshir developments adds a geopolitical layer, effectively turning the Kabul basin into an extension of South Asia's broader water rivalry.

Pakistan must therefore respond with a strategy that protects downstream flows and agricultural security, preserves its international legal standing as a responsible riparian, counters Indian influence through constructive regional engagement, and converts hydrological vulnerability into diplomatic and economic leverage. While Pakistan is technically an upper riparian on the Chitral segment, its practical capacity to divert or store significant volumes upstream is restricted. The terrain is mountainous, infrastructure options limited, and large-scale diversion would be cost-prohibitive and environmentally risky.

From a legal perspective, deliberate manipulation of flows would violate key principles of international water law, including equitable and reasonable utilisation, and obligation not to cause significant harm. Such action would undermine Pakistan's credibility in other transboundary contexts, most notably under the Indus Waters Treaty with India, where Pakistan relies on the same legal norms for downstream protection.

> The Kabul River system has emerged as a potential flashpoint in Pak-Afghan relations.

Thus, while Pakistan retains hydrological leverage, it should not pursue coercive diversion as a countermeasure. Instead, this leverage should be exercised through strategic hydro-diplomacy and cooperative basin governance by developing a strategic response framework to:

Establish a bilateral water commission: Initiate negotiations for a Pakistan-Afghanistan Water Commission under a structured 'Kabul River Basin Dialogue'; include data-sharing, minimum flow guarantees, flood forecasting, and seasonal regulation protocols; seek facilitation by World Bank, ICIMOD, or UNESCAP to ensure neutrality and technical credibility.

Promote a 'benefit-sharing' model: Propose joint hydropower or irrigation projects where both sides gain proportionally from regulated storage; Pakistan may offer to purchase surplus hydropower from Afghan dams or finance co-managed reservoirs that ensure stable downstream releases; the model transforms the river from a zero-sum resource into a shared economic asset.

Deploy climate diplomacy tools: Frame the Kabul basin as a climate-vulnerable transboundary system needing adaptation finance; mobilise Green Climate Fund or Loss and Damage finance windows for joint resilience projects — glacier monitoring, early warning systems, irrigation modernisation — creating shared dependence on cooperative governance.

Counter Indian influence through engagement: Offer Afghanistan direct technical cooperation and concessional energy trade to reduce dependency on Indian-backed infrastructure; engage multilaterally (ECO, SAARC, SCO) to make unilateral Indian-Afghan projects politically less viable.

Develop strategic water intelligence & monitoring: Strengthen satellite-based hydrological monitoring of the Kabul basin using the capabilities of Suparco and Wapda; establish a national cell under the National Security Division to continuously assess upstream developments, construction progress, and foreign technical involvement.

Prepare contingency response plans: Model the economic and agricultural impact of a 10-20pc flow reduction scenario to inform national drought resilience planning; accelerate domestic measures — groundwater regulation, small storage schemes, and canal efficiency — in KP and the Indus plains to offset potential losses.

Pakistan faces a critical juncture in its water diplomacy with Afghanistan. The choice is between reacting to provocation of 'water weaponisation' or proactively shaping a rules-based,climate-resilient, and mutually beneficial framework for transboundary water management. Pakistan should adopt a strategy that emphasises regional hydro cooperation by securing predictable downstream flows, limiting India's geopolitical encroachment, strengthening its international standing as a responsible riparian, and transforming the Kabul River from a security liability into a platform for regional stability and shared prosperity.

Water must be managed as an instrument of strategic leverage, not confrontation. However, if diplomatic initiative, technical readiness, and climate framing through cooperation does not work, Pakistan retains its upper riparian leverage to defend its future water security. ■

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